


## ICEBERG OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE ASPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices can be integrated into organizations to promote organizational sustainability, addressing the urgent need for a systemic perspective on the relationship between humans, markets, and the environment. Employing a qualitative approach, the research was conducted through a literature review, identifying practices within the environmental, social, and governance dimensions that contribute to organizational sustainability. The study revealed that the balanced adoption of ESG practices strengthens organizations, enhancing their capacity to generate long-term value, manage risks, and improve efficiency. As a contribution, the Organizational Sustainability Iceberg Model was developed, classifying visible and invisible aspects of organizational sustainability. This research introduces a visual model to support organizations and researchers in the application of ESG practices, offering a structured perspective on the essential elements of organizational sustainability. The conclusions are limited to theoretical analysis, with empirical validation of the model recommended in different organizational contexts.

**Keywords:** Organization. ESG. Environmental. Social and Governance Practices. Sustainability. Organizational Sustainability.

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## INTRODUCTION

The world is changing, and beyond profit, organizations are increasingly considering purpose and their impact on society, addressing environmental, social, and corporate governance issues. Sustainable development has gained importance, signaling a shift towards integrating sustainability criteria into business strategies (Amaral *et al.*, 2023).

In this context, the concept of organizational sustainability is evolving, and this conceptual progress highlights environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices, reinforcing an organization's capacity to generate long-term value, improve efficiency, manage risks, and enhance competitive advantage through innovation (Belinky, 2021; Costa *et al.*, 2022; Silva, 2023).

The literature reveals studies connecting ESG practices and organizational sustainability, though most focus primarily on environmental issues (Saxena *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, while many articles discuss the benefits of adopting these practices, they often fail to address how organizations implement them in a balanced manner or which specific aspects are impacted (Teles *et al.*, 2015; Eccles *et al.*, 2020; Senadheera *et al.*, 2022; Amaral *et al.*, 2023). This underscores the need for further research on the topic (Nunhes *et al.*, 2020; Gillan *et al.*, 2021; Nakagawa, 2023).

For this reason, it is necessary to understand how ESG practices can be adopted in a balanced way by organizations to promote organizational sustainability.

## SUSTAINABILITY

The initial ideas about sustainable development emerged in the late 1950s, marking a transition from a solely economic focus, as advocated by Friedman (1979), to a broader perspective in which organizations prioritize not only profit but also social and environmental objectives, emphasizing the critical role of businesses within an integrated and interdisciplinary approach (Elkington, 2012).

In the 1980s, the United Nations' *Our Common Future* report, also known as the Brundtland Report, introduced the concept of sustainability, defining it as the ability to meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 1987).

During the 1990s, Capra (1996) and Elkington (2012) developed concepts offering alternatives to the traditional profit-maximization focus proposed by Friedman (1979). Both presented a more systemic perspective on sustainability, considering the interdependence

of economic, social, and environmental factors. While Friedman viewed businesses as primarily economic agents, Capra and Elkington argued that companies should act as integral parts of a larger system, where their actions have significant consequences for society and the environment.

This led to the emergence of organizations pursuing sustainable actions, seeking a balance between economic viability and the conscious use of natural resources (Fialho *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, there has been an increased need for businesses to adapt swiftly to new organizational models that are more flexible, emphasizing individuals' interactions with society and decision-making transparency (Willerding, 2015).

The survival of humanity increasingly depends on a harmonious relationship with the environment, requiring cooperation and interaction among all living beings and their surroundings. This necessitates the adoption of a systemic, interconnected, and holistic view (Capra, 1996).

Thus, economic power should not be seen as the ultimate goal but rather as an instrument for achieving a balance among these factors (Panisson *et al.*, 2017). Sustainability practices should transcend economic perspectives, assuming a central role in guiding businesses toward more sustainable (Esteves, 2021) and healthier practices (Amaral *et al.*, 2023).

In this context, sustainability is critical for understanding the interactions between development and environmental preservation, as well as the interconnectedness of individuals and the impact of their actions on Earth.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Incorporating sustainability into business is closely tied to the concept of shared value, wherein companies can increase productivity along the value chain through sustainable practices (Porter, Kramer, 2011). When organizations focus solely on growth for profit without generating value, they may experience short-term growth but ultimately lose the ability to innovate, maintain customer focus, and sustain a long-term vision. It is essential to understand sustainability as a driver of value for all stakeholders (Mendes, 2012).

Stakeholder theory recognizes that organizations have obligations not only to shareholders but to all stakeholders. This is vital, as stakeholder pressure drives efforts to improve organizational outcomes (Gonçalves, 2014). Furthermore, organizations bear

responsibility for the planet's future and the well-being of upcoming generations (Alexandrino, 2020).

Organizational sustainability is associated with the ability to ensure long-term continuity and success (Vildåsen *et al.*, 2017; Nunhes *et al.*, 2020). Companies are considered sustainable when they adopt environmental, social, and corporate governance practices (Costa *et al.*, 2022), generating benefits across various aspects of the organization and contributing to sustainable development (Teles *et al.*, 2015).

The adoption of sustainable practices and the balance between environmental, social, and economic dimensions remain a topic of ongoing debate. Nevertheless, achieving this balance is a critical and urgent priority (Barrymore, Sampson, 2021; Delgado-Ceballos *et al.*, 2023).

## ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL, AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE (ESG) PRACTICES

With the growing adoption of environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) practices, it is evident that adopting the ESG perspective instead of the broader sustainability approach broadens the scope and optimizes initiatives, resulting in a more sustainable organization (Niemoller, 2021).

The implementation of ESG practices emerges as a fundamental strategy for organizational sustainability, enabling companies to minimize negative environmental impacts, promote equitable social relations, and ensure ethical and transparent corporate governance (Teles *et al.*, 2015; Amaral *et al.*, 2023).

The literature presents various practices related to the environmental, social, and governance dimensions of ESG. However, there is no consensus on which practices are most effective or appropriate for promoting organizational sustainability (Amaral *et al.*, 2024). Table 1 summarizes the main environmental, social, and governance practices identified.

Table 1 – Environmental, social and governance practices identified in the literature

ESG Practices	Authors
Environmental Impact Assessment	Garay; Font, 2012; Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2015
Climate change, greenhouse gas mitigation, climate change adaptation, energy efficiency, and alternative energy sources	Garay; Font, 2012; Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Niemoller, 2021; Costa <i>et al.</i> , 2022; ABNT, 2022; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023

for small and medium-sized enterprises	
Water and effluent management	Bandinelli <i>et al.</i> , 2020; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023
Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and soil	Bandinelli <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Circular economy and waste management	Garay; Font, 2012; Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Bandinelli <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Environmental management, air quality management, contaminated areas, and hazardous materials management	Garay; Font, 2012; Costa <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023;.
Territorial development, private social investment, stakeholder dialogue and engagement, and social impact	Alvares; Souza, 2016; Chams, 2020; Cruz, 2021; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Garay; Font, 2012; Lee <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Monteiro <i>et al.</i> , 2021; ABNT, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Systematic inclusion of individuals or groups from surrounding communities as suppliers	Galego-Alvarez <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023
Respect for human rights, elimination of forced or compulsory labor, and eradication of child labor	Garay; Font, 2012; Alvares; Souza, 2016; ABNT, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Cruz, 2021; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Policies and practices for diversity, equity, and inclusion promotion	Alvares; Souza, 2016; Chams, 2020; Cruz, 2021; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Garay; Font, 2012; Lee <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Monteiro <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Schleich, 2022; ABNT, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Fair labor relations and practices, professional development, quality of life, freedom of association, and remuneration and benefits policies	Galego-Alvarez <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Schleich, 2022; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Occupational health and safety management	ABNT, 2022; Schleich, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023

Promotion of social responsibility in the value chain and stakeholder engagement	Garay; Font, 2012; Galego-Alvarez <i>et al.</i> , 2014; ABNT, 2022; Schleich, 2022; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023
Training and development policies within the value chain	Schleich, 2022; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023
Corporate governance structure and composition, purpose, and strategy related to sustainability	Garay; Font, 2012; Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Monteiro <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; IBGC, 2023.
Business conduct, compliance, integrity programs, anti-corruption practices, prevention of unfair competition, and stakeholder engagement	Monteiro <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Cruz, 2021; Amaral <i>et al.</i> , 2023; ABNT, 2022; Costa <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Arco-Castro <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; IBGC, 2023.
Internal controls, business risk management, audits, legal and regulatory compliance, information security, and personal data privacy	Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; IBGC, 2023.
Transparency in management, accountability, ESG reporting, sustainability reporting, or integrated reporting	Teles <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Amel-Zadeh; Serafeim, 2018; Cruz, 2021; ABNT, 2022; Galindo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; IBGC, 2023.

Source: Prepared by the Authors (2024).

The adoption of social and environmental practices helps identify organizations with desirable and important characteristics for stakeholders (Niemoller, 2021). The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Brazilian Institute of Corporate Governance (IBGC) recommend integrating ESG aspects into organizational decision-making and strategic processes, as it is the responsibility of the organization's top management to establish an environmental, social, and governance culture (GRI; IBGC, 2019). It is important to note that this journey is unique and varies for each organization (ABNT, 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as qualitative exploratory research, aiming to understand the meaning of a social or human problem (Creswell, 2010). Its objective is to explore how organizations can adopt ESG practices in a balanced manner to promote their sustainability. This article is part of the first author's doctoral research, already presented to

the qualification committee, under the supervision of the other two authors, who serve respectively as co-supervisor and supervisor.

A literature review was conducted with systematic searches in the Web of Science and Scopus databases using the terms “organizational sustainability” and “ESG practices,” along with searches in other data sources. From the selected documents, environmental, social, and governance practices were identified, which helped pinpoint aspects contributing to organizational sustainability.

To meet the objective and represent the research findings, the study used an analogy with Edward Hall’s cultural iceberg model (1976). This model explains that only a small part of a culture is visible above the surface, such as language and behaviors, while the majority, including beliefs, values, and thoughts, lies submerged and invisible. This highlights the importance of being aware of these invisible aspects to fully understand a culture (Hall, 1976). Consequently, the Organizational Sustainability Iceberg was developed.

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY ICEBERG

When applied to the organizational context, the visible aspects of an organization—such as policies, structures, and formal processes—can be illustrated. These aspects, although easily observed and measured, represent only the tip of the iceberg. A crucial portion that significantly influences organizational performance and competitive advantage lies below the surface, often deeply rooted and virtually impossible to quantify.

In Table 2, the visible and invisible aspects identified in the literature as determining factors for organizational sustainability are presented.

Table 2 – Visible and Invisible Aspects of Organizational Sustainability

<b>Visible Aspects</b>	<b>Invisible Aspects</b>
Healthy organization	Entrepreneurial management
Innovation	Incentive structures
Communication with stakeholders	Sustainable internal policies
Social initiatives	Value generation
Investor criteria	Organizational resilience
Sustainability reports	Ethical behavior
Sustainable products	ESG balance
Better outcomes	ESG strategy
Agenda 2030	ESG dimensions interdependence
Environmental certifications	Governance systems
Strategic planning	Competitive differentiation
Diversity and inclusion	Cultural transformation

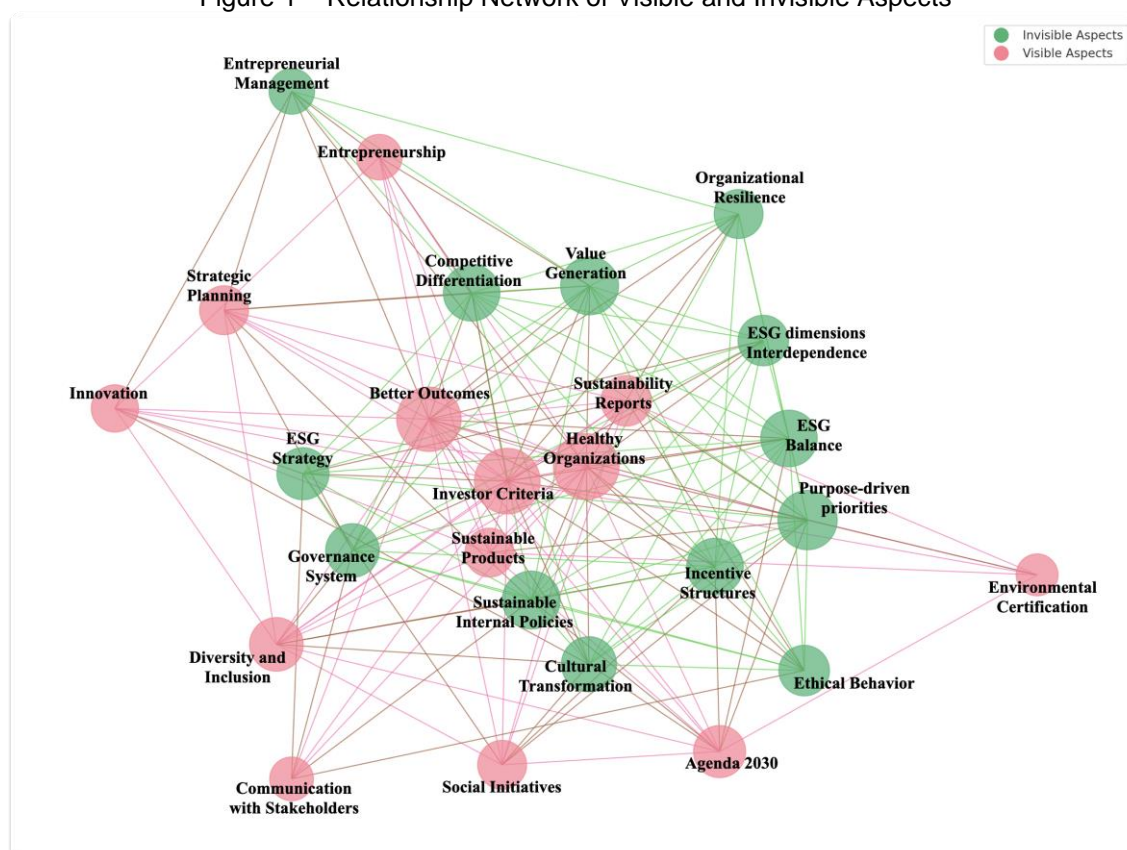


Entrepreneurship	Purpose-driven priorities
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Source: Prepared by the Authors (2024).

The visible aspects represent practices and indicators that are easily measurable, while the invisible aspects reflect deeper and more subjective elements that permeate the organization's purpose and culture, directly influencing strategic alignment with ESG principles and practices. The visible and invisible elements are interconnected with one another and among themselves, impacting each other and organizational sustainability at varying intensities. For better visualization, Figure 1 was developed.

Figure 1 – Relationship Network of Visible and Invisible Aspects



Source: Prepared by the Authors (2024).

In Figure 1, it is observed that visible and invisible aspects are interconnected, reflecting a complex dynamic of interdependence that supports the balanced adoption of ESG practices. This interconnection can be understood through the lens of the Web of Life theory, which suggests that all elements of a living system maintain symbiotic and interdependent relationships, forming a network in which each component influences and is influenced by the others (Capra, 1996).



In the organizational context, both tangible and more easily measurable elements, such as processes and practices, and intangible, less visible, or harder-to-measure elements, such as culture, ethics, and values, play essential roles in promoting sustainability. From this systemic perspective, each organizational aspect—whether visible or invisible—gains relevance within a set, where its value emerges from the relationships and flows between the components of the organization.

Capra's theory (1996), by emphasizing the interconnectedness and mutuality of components, sheds light on how organizational sustainability depends on a holistic view, capable of encompassing the complex network of relationships that defines the viability and evolution of the organizational system over time.

Based on the connections between visible and invisible aspects, a word cloud was developed in which the larger words represent those most interconnected, as these have the greatest impact on organizational sustainability (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Word Cloud of Visible and Invisible Aspects



Source: Prepared by the Authors (2024).

Better outcomes, healthy organizations, investment criteria, value creation, competitive advantage, and prioritization of purpose stand out as key elements in fostering organizational sustainability. By drawing a parallel between visible and invisible aspects and their interconnections, the Organizational Sustainability Iceberg Model was conceptualized. This analogy of an iceberg enhances understanding by emphasizing the complexity of organizational contexts and the importance of delving beneath the surface to fully grasp their deeper and more intricate dynamics (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Organizational Sustainability Iceberg



Source: Prepared by the Authors (2024).

As observed in the Organizational Sustainability Iceberg (Figure 3), adopting environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices has become essential to ensuring organizational sustainability and generating a range of benefits for organizations that implement them. Some of these benefits are more visible and tangible, while others are harder to identify or even intangible.

Organizations that incorporate ESG practices into their daily operations not only demonstrate their commitment to their own sustainability and that of society but also reap various benefits. These benefits are often clear when analyzing the organization and should align with its strategic planning. Examples include obtaining environmental certifications, developing sustainable products, adopting social initiatives—particularly those focused on diversity and inclusion—and maintaining a healthy organization.

Additionally, these organizations establish transparent and effective communication with stakeholders. Publishing reliable sustainability reports demonstrates transparency and accountability, reinforcing their reputation as healthy organizations—an important criterion for investors. Such organizations are engaged with the 2030 Agenda, showcasing their commitment to sustainable development, meeting current expectations, and anticipating future social and environmental demands.

In a capitalist world, it cannot be denied that at the core of these efforts is the pursuit of a competitive edge that results in better outcomes for the organization and its shareholders. However, beneath the surface—through actions, strategies, values, or beliefs that are harder to observe or measure—the foundation for these results is secured. For this, the balanced adoption of ESG practices is essential. This foundation is further supported by implementing sustainable internal policies, transforming organizational culture, encouraging ethical behavior, prioritizing purpose beyond profit, and establishing governance systems. Furthermore, organizations that adopt these practices recognize the interdependence of environmental, social, and governance dimensions and create incentive structures to support their integration.

Other invisible or hard-to-measure elements include adopting an organizational strategy focused on balancing environmental, social, and governance dimensions, which provides a competitive edge in the market where the organization operates, and creating value over the short, medium, and long term. These factors are vital to ensuring not only a healthy and resilient present but also a sustainable future for upcoming generations.

The effectiveness of an ESG-focused strategy in promoting organizational sustainability is reflected in the ability to anticipate risks and seize opportunities. In an increasingly volatile and uncertain business environment, adopting these practices provides organizations with direction to address new challenges, such as climate change, social inequality, and evolving management practices. The balanced integration of environmental, social, and governance dimensions enables organizations to balance economic growth with social and environmental responsibility. This approach makes them more adaptable and innovative, allowing them to thrive and generate sustainable value.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study aimed to understand how environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices can be integrated into organizations in a balanced way to promote organizational sustainability. Through a qualitative approach supported by a literature review, the research identified that the adoption of ESG practices fosters healthy organizations, improving their capacity to generate value and achieve better results.

Based on these findings, the Organizational Sustainability Iceberg model was developed. This graphical representation can be used both for future research and for practical applications in organizations. The model distinguishes visible and measurable

aspects, such as innovation and stakeholder communication, from invisible and subjective elements, such as prioritizing purpose and transforming organizational culture. The balanced adoption of ESG practices supports sustainable development, makes organizations healthier, more attractive to investors, and better equipped to achieve superior outcomes.

This study is limited by its qualitative and exploratory nature. Therefore, the conclusions are interpretative, and the results reflect a theoretical perspective on the topic. For future research, it is recommended to empirically validate the model by applying it to different types of organizations to evaluate its effectiveness and adaptability.

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